

RUSSIA: A CASUALTY ADVERSE ARMY

By retired Lt. Col. John K. Foley



A Soviet gun crew in action at Odessa in 1941. (John Erickson/Wikicommons)

During the Cold War, the U.S. Army trained to oppose the hordes of the Soviet Red Army. The U.S. and NATO expected to engage in combat against advancing echelons of tanks and infantry swarming across the Fulda Gap, supported by mass artillery fire. However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and difficulty fighting the Chechens, Russian military strategists were forced to creatively overcome their military disadvantages.

Our image of Russian forces has radically changed since now they became a casualty-adverse army. This is largely due to demographic, social and technological changes in Russia. It's also the driving force behind Russia's transition to a volunteer Army.

For the last few decades, Russia has experienced a demographic decline. The combination of low birth rate and high mortality rate; especially among men, led to a bleak outlook for their future fighting force.¹ During WWII, the Soviet Army commonly used its numerical advantage to conduct mass human wave-style attacks against the German Army. However, in the years following WWII, Russia transitioned from a rural population to an urban industrial population. As a result, Soviet women opted for one- or two-child families.² Many factors contributed to this: a high demand for women workers, a highly educated female population, high abortion rate, even adverse pressures of Soviet and later Rus-

¹ Joshua Keating, 'Did Russia Really Boost Its Birthrate by Promising New Mothers Prize Money and Refrigerators?' (13 Oct 2014), Slate Magazine.

² A.AVDEEV, 'The extent of the fertility decline in Russia: is the one-child family here to stay?' Center for Population Problems Studies, Moscow State University, Moscow, 2001

sian society.³ These demographic challenges now rule out future Soviet-style massed echelons of armor and mechanized attacks.

Coinciding with this shift to smaller families is the decreasing positive image of the military. Through a series of wars beginning in the 1990s, Russia engaged in continuous combat in one form or another. All of these conflicts proved unpopular, especially to the one-child families. Russia's leaders were beginning to take notice of the effect this had on its military. During the Chechen Wars of the 1990s several high profile instances occurred where mothers of servicemen came to the battlefield to retrieve their sons.⁴ These young men often were taken as prisoners of war or killed. Russian military mismanagement compounded the negative perception of the war.⁵ The loss of life in this conflict was publicized by the new "free" Russian media which created an uproar among the Russian public. Lessons from these wars forced military planners to think about becoming averse to strategies that created casualties.⁶

In Russia, military service has a long history of dread among the population. In Czarist days, villages fulfilled annual quotas to supply recruits. Military service in Soviet times became more common, especially during WWII. However, following the war Soviet society was stratified with the upper class "nomenklatura" and all others below them. The avoidance of military service became common place for the nomenklatura. Therefore, military service fell disproportionately on the population who could least avoid conscription. During the late Soviet period, military service became even less attractive as the military became notorious for "dedovshchina," or violent hazing and bullying within the ranks. To this day "dedovshchina" is reportedly common in the Russian military. In 2006, the New York Times cited 16 soldiers were killed by the practice and hundreds more committed suicide.⁷ The war in Afghanistan escalated the problem, only to be followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union. By the onset of the Chechen Wars of the 1990s, Russia's military was in dire straits.⁸ Parents' aversion to conscription still continues to haunt the Russian military.

Since the early 2000s, Russia has embraced the concept of professional officers, noncommissioned officers and soldiers. They have invested in improved military education. Instead of modeling the U.S. system, Russia chose the Swiss and Austrian systems.⁹ Russia has drastically reduced the size of their army, but they tripled the salary for officers and soldiers. They even adopted a Russian version of the Servicemembers Group Life Insurance with a Russian insurance company, SOGAZ, which pays 3,506 million rubles — \$58,000 — to families of deceased soldiers.¹⁰ They discarded the old Soviet-era uniforms and equipment and started outfitting their soldiers with modern digital camouflage uniforms and new weapons. The downside is that Russia continues to fall short of its recruiting targets to field a full volunteer (contract) military. They prioritized combat arms units with contract soldiers. As a result they still are dependent on conscription combat service support, especially in logistics and support units.

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Russia also leverages surrogate forces in all of its conflicts. One of the distinctions between the Chechen wars of 1995 to that of 1999, was how the Russian Army co-opted and used specific Chechen forces in their second war in 1999. Chechen units such as the Vostok (eastern) and Zapad (western) battalions, led by members of the GRU (military intelligence) and Russian Special Forces community proved instrumental in Russia's invasion and subsequent counterinsurgency campaign inside Chechnya.¹¹ The Russian surrogate Vostok Battalion went on to participate in the invasion of Georgia and is now participating in the current Ukrainian conflict in the Donbas.¹² Due to this success, numerous other surrogate forces have been established and masquerade as "separatist" including Donbass People's Militia, Army of the South-East, the Russian Orthodox Army, Neo-Cossacks, Ossetian and Abkhaz paramilitaries.¹³ There are many benefits of these forces, from plausible deniability to local knowledge and experience, but the fundamental advantage is they are not citizens from the heart of Russia. Those Russians that do engage in this type of warfare are "volunteers." Unlike the Russian conscript whose parents didn't want their sons in military service against their will, these hardcore mercenaries operate as a quasi-Putin Foreign Legion. They operate under the guidance and instruction of military intelligence and Special Forces. Any casualties they incur are of little to no concern of families back home in Moscow.

A common theme running through developments in Russian military technology is fighting a stand-off battle. The Russians invest heavily in cyber and information warfare. Unlike the U.S. where many college students in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields are foreign students, Russia has effec-

3 Nicholas Eberstadt, *Drunken Nation: Russia's Depopulation Bomb*, World Affairs Journal, Spring 2009.4 Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus*, New York, 1998, p. 124.

4 Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus*, New York, 1998, p. 124.

5 Pavel Felgenhaur, *Russia's Forces Unreconstructed, Perspective*, Vol X, Number 4 (March-April 2000), Institute for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy.

6 Ibid.

7 Mike Bird, 'What it's like to be a conscript in the Russian military', Business Insider, 29 October 29, 2015.

8 Pavel Felgenhaur, *Russia's Forces Unreconstructed, Perspective*, Vol X, Number 4 (March-April 2000), Institute for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy.

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11 FMSO, OE Watch, 'Detailed Description of Russian GRU Utilization in Eastern Ukraine' Vol. 5 Issue #09 September 2015.

12 Tim Ripley, 'Kiev troops retake Donetsk airport', Jane's Defense Weekly, 4 June 2014.

13 Alec Luhn, 'Volunteers or paid fighters? The Vostok Battalion looms large in war with Kiev', The Guardian, Friday 6 June, <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/alec-luhn>

tively grown highly skilled Russian STEM students.¹⁴ Now they are a world leader in the realm of computers, software development and some of the most notorious computer hackers. They have effectively wielded these weapons against the U.S. and NATO countries.¹⁵ Of more concern to the warfighter is their effective use of unmanned aerial system (UAS) technology. They have used the Ukrainian conflict as a testbed for not only a multitude of UAS systems, but they are also developing a new artillery doctrine in conjunction with UAS doctrine. This falls in line with their heavy reliance on artillery and multiple rocket launchers. Russia is using these as stand-off weapons in Ukraine to a great effect.¹⁶ Compounding this threat is Russia's use of sub-munitions, which they have used against the Ukrainian military with devastating results. The U.S. has largely given up the capability to use artillery sub-munitions due to the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty, AKA "Princess Diana" treaty, outlawing landmine and sub-munitions.¹⁷ Russia has also invested heavily in non-lethal effects like electronic warfare (EW). Creditable analysis now attributes Russia having overmatch with regard to the U.S. in the field of tactical-level EW.¹⁸

Russia has also spent billions of dollars upgrading their armor in T-72, T-80 and T-90 tanks. Russian battalion tactical groups now outrange the typical U.S. brigade combat team and can fight their U.S. counterpart at maximum ranges in direct fire engagements.¹⁹ Tanks like the T-90 and the T-14 Armata place greater emphasis on crew survivability. The T-14 even takes comfort into consideration, which the Russians have not been widely known for in their armor development. The Armata tank uses an electronic, non-manned tank turret, with the crew positioned in the hull for increased survivability.²⁰ The T-14 Armata hints at the Russian evolution to robotic tanks.²¹ The Russian's are increasingly placing emphasis on robotics, as a further use of stand-off weapons and are actively pursuing unmanned ground warfare and unmanned ground vehicles (UGV). They have developed and deployed the "Platforma-M" armed robot system with some of their elite units, like naval infantry. They are even considering plans to retrofit main battle tanks into UGVs. As with UASs, the Russians could quickly excel in the field of military robotics. This tactic makes for a perfect solution to their demographic problem.

For this casualty adverse army, achieving success in the long-range fight (air, artillery, tank etc.), is of utmost importance. For

U.S. forces, combatting this starts with joint Fires. This is a "must win" fight for the U.S., so all assets need to be available with minimum restrictions. Russia knows our ability to fight in a joint environment is one of our greatest strengths, which is why they started organizing to fight jointly as well.²² Since they are at an earlier development in joint warfare, this is still a strength the U.S. and its allies can leverage. The key to successfully targeting the Russians in joint warfare is to destroy their EW and command and control capability (C2). These tend to be redundant and so its destruction is a challenge for U.S. forces. Additionally, the focus should be on destruction, not suppression. Fighting the Russians will be unlike anything ever experienced by America's armed forces. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has focused on achieving military results with minimum casualties on both sides, civilian and military. Russia's EW and C2 capability are targets where the low density military occupational specialties (MOSs) reside. Whoever successfully produces the most casualties among the others low density MOSs, will have an advantage in achieving victory on this high technology battlefield. The U.S. military should also focus extra attention on attacking Russian logistics. Logistics is traditionally a Russian weakness and targeting it will adversely impact the Russians in battle. It will also hit the conscripted forces in greater numbers which is more likely to undermine Russia's will to continue an armed conflict. Lastly, the U.S. must dominate the close fight at the brigade combat team level. Be it by tactics, and/or weapons, neither side can afford to suffer excessive casualties among its professional volunteer forces. They are expensive to maintain and hard to replace. That said, every advantage must be sought when engaging Russian forces to produce casualties. This may seem obvious to military leaders, however not since the Gulf War of 1991, has U.S. armed forces dealt the level of destruction required to defeat an adversary like Russia.

When taken as a whole, Russia not only needs to fight a stand-off battle to offset casualties, but has the capability to do so successfully. When the totality of Russia's assets are accounted for: information warfare, surrogate forces, EW, UAS, artillery, upgraded armor, combined with their new volunteer army, Russia poses a challenge to U.S. forces. They are an old threat made new and a significant threat to U.S. forces not only in Eastern Europe, but in the Middle East as well. The challenge now is to acknowledge this threat and get after the hard task of problem solving to mitigate it.

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